

NOT YOUR  
WHITE JESUS

*Following a Radical,  
Refugee Messiah*

SHERI FAYE ROSENDAHL

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PART I  
THE RADICAL,  
REFUGEE MESSIAH

## Chapter 1

# NOT YOUR WHITE JESUS

Jesus is not a white guy. I hate to break it to you, but all those pictures you grew up seeing on the walls of your church or in your grandma's dining room showcasing the fair-skinned, blue-eyed, handsome, white Jesus are fabrications. They lied to you. Jesus isn't American; he's not even campaigning for America's greatness!

There's more. He actually doesn't care more about Americans than any other humans in the entire world (including Muslims and Communists). I'm serious—I checked the entire Bible and couldn't find one sentence pertaining to America being the most amazing nation ever in existence. I know, I was shocked too.

Blatant sarcasm aside, if you are like me, raised in a typical white American Christian home going to church every Sunday as a child, you know what I am talking about. If you didn't grow up in this fabricated, cookie-cutter context, but you grew up virtually anywhere in the United States, chances are you know what I'm talking about. If you grew up in a completely different culture and country but you have seen Americans on TV, chances are you *still* know what I'm talking about.

As a kid, I never differentiated Jesus from the Christianity I saw; to me they seemed one and the same. Christianity is a religion, and I've always felt some aversion

toward religion. No matter how hard I tried, I never felt I belonged inside the walls of a church building. Though I was raised in an evangelical church, I felt like an observing outcast wondering why I heard talk of loving others but felt the weight of judgment and exclusivity. It wasn't all bad; I had some fun social times in youth groups, mostly meeting cute boys. I even believed the ABCs I grew up hearing in order to save my soul from eternal hellfire: A: Admit that you are a sinner in need of grace. B: Believe that God sent Jesus to die a bloody death for our sins. C: Confess Jesus as your Lord and Savior. When I was about four years old, I vividly remember sitting on an oversized maroon suede chair in my living room and essentially yelling at Jesus to get into my heart over and over again because I couldn't be sure if he was in there or not and I was terrified because—you know—the hellfire pit and gnashing of teeth and what not.

That was pretty much the extent of my involvement while growing up in the world of white Christianity. The American Church always felt like a place to be hurt, not a place for the hurting. From as far back as I can remember—a few real, spiritual moments in youth group aside—I always felt there was something more to this whole thing we call life, some sort of purpose that actually held meaning in this world. However, I definitely wasn't seeing that purpose—that radical, world-changing call—in church. I wasn't seeing Jesus. In the midst of Christianity, I somehow completely missed the ways of Jesus, and I don't think that I am unique in this.

The truth is, growing up in this supposed “Christian nation,” it took me a quarter of a century to figure out who Jesus actually is. We tend to be a self-serving, money-driven, achievement-based, all-too-fearful nation, and there

is a large section of the American Church that has followed right along, loud and proud, worshiping a made-up character I call White-Jesus.

To be perfectly clear, I'm not trying to debate Jesus' literal skin color. Jesus was born in Palestine, so it is safe to assume his skin was some shade of brown, but the White-Jesus ideology is much more than just mistakenly picturing Jesus as a Caucasian American. White-Jesus is the symbolic representation of a white-washed, Americanized Jesus that not all, but much of the American Church seems to follow. White-Jesus represents the conservative ideology that is controlled by white guys and dominates the American Church. It is an ideology that we see spread throughout the religion of Christianity, but it is also an ideology that is prevalent in our nation's politics.

White-Jesus Christianity stands firmly against health care for the vulnerable but is all about tax breaks for big business and spending millions and millions on its president's lavish "needs." White-Jesus Christianity is a crusader for the right to birth while blatantly disregarding a right to life as it writes off children slaughtered around the globe in American drone strikes as "collateral damage." White-Jesus Christianity strongly advocates for the deportation of immigrants who are simply trying to provide a life for their families, and it refuses refuge to the most vulnerable—giving them an essential death sentence—but increases in military funds are totally cool.

The White-Jesus ideology of American Christianity has largely failed when it comes to preaching and practicing the message of Jesus and collectively gets it wrong far more than right. Because of White-Jesus ideology, the term "American Christian" invokes thoughts of the vastly oppressive and even hateful philosophy that is imbedded

not only in our culture, but in our political sphere, having an effect on the world as a whole. The severity of our situation should be blatantly obvious in the fact that American White-Jesus Christians have managed to bring to power a bigoted-misogynistic-racist sexual predator as the “leader” of this nation.

There are, for sure, many amazing Christians in the U.S. who are truly trying to follow Jesus to the depths of their soul. However, the version of Christianity dominating the U.S. religious landscape has failed to fulfill its basic self-proclaimed purpose. It has white-washed Jesus, dressing him in a \$3,000 suit (made by workers earning pennies), with an American flag tie and boots made of alligator skin as he campaigns for capitalism and gun rights. That’s often what we see in the major leaders of White-Jesus American churches, at least.

The thing is, it only takes a few minutes to flip through the pages of the Gospels to see how the person of Jesus has been distorted. The true message of this brown-skinned, Palestinian Jew is, in reality, the exact opposite of what is largely portrayed by the masses who follow White-Jesus American Christianity. The Jesus of the Gospels was actually a total badass in a countercultural, all-inclusive, anti-materialistic, radically loving kind of way. He was born to a teenage mother, fled as a refugee from an oppressive king, and amazed the most educated teachers when he was just a kid. People called him the Son of God, and yet he hung out with those that most people wouldn’t even give a second look and was only really harsh on the self-righteous religious people.

When I finally discovered the Jesus of the Gospels and read his words, often printed in red letters, I found a love that changes everything, a love that can transform our

world. Not in that awkward, “religiousy” way, but in a life-changing, joy-bringing, compassionate, humbling, almost poetic way. Jesus represents love—not Christianity.

Can you imagine what the world would look like if the thousands of Christian churches in this nation actually lived like Jesus? Generous with their funds, maybe housing the poor instead of spending millions of dollars on brand new fancy buildings? According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, around 21 percent of children in the U.S. live below the federal poverty line. That’s close to 15 million children living below the poverty level—the second highest rate of child poverty of any developed nation.<sup>1</sup> That is appalling in itself, but in a nation that claims to follow the ways of a man who lived his entire life serving the poor, it is straight up shameful. What the actual hell, American Christianity? While mega churches produce multi-millionaire pastors, millions of children in their backyard can’t afford to eat. Jesus never told anyone to take all their money and build bigger church buildings; he did, however, instruct people to give their money to the poor. How big of an impact would it make if we actually spent way less on buildings and gave way more to the poor?

The most important command Jesus specifically gave was to love your neighbor—this command was put on the same level as loving God—kind of a big deal. And what does loving your neighbor—the Great Commandment of Jesus—actually look like according to J-man himself? Jesus answered that exact question with the story of the Good Samaritan, so what if we looked at that story in the context of our world today? In modern-day terms, it would look something like finding a beat-up, half-dead ISIS leader on the side of the road, stopping, taking him in, bandaging his wounds, and spending your own money to have him cared

for. Knowing he is your biggest enemy and showing him love anyway. That's a self-sacrificial kind of love.

\* \* \*

Trying to live a life with Jesus means living completely counter to culture. It is both incredibly easy and incredibly difficult. It means that loving others takes priority over loving yourself in every way: your time, your hobbies, your money, your career. It means letting go of what the world's idea of what life should be, which can be a major struggle; at least it was for me.

For much of my life I worked my ass off to provide for my daughter (who I had very young—too young), do well in school, get my degree, and get a good job. My great goal was financial security, which in itself is not at all a bad thing. Through college, I was the girl who spent countless hours in coffee shops writing five-thousand-word practice essays contrasting U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, Central America, and Africa until I had every essay option that I could possibly be given on my exams memorized so that regardless of the prompt I was given, I could fill out my body weight in blue books without missing a word. Yes, I had serious issues. Even worse, I actually enjoyed the tireless hours of studying, striving for perfection. Regardless, for a kid who literally did nothing through high school, the borderline crazy hard work paid off, and I graduated with a BA in history with high honors. I also minored in education, because what else are you going to do with a bachelor's degree in history?

However, after all that hard work, I had trouble becoming state certified to teach because I couldn't afford to forego paid employment while fulfilling the student

teaching requirement. Despite my lack of full certification, thanks to a former professor, I got referred to some high schools for interviews. My goal had been financial security for my family and I needed a good stable job, but there were going to be some major walls I had to get through. There were the obvious facts that I was not fully certified and that there is not exactly a shortage of history teachers desperately searching for jobs. On top of it all, I got insanely nervous in every interview. It was awkward. After a few months of interviewing and summer coming to an end, I got a call from an urban alternative high school that worked strictly with at-risk students.

I was definitely considered at-risk in my own high school years, and this happened to be the demographic I wanted to teach more than any other. This was essentially my dream job in the world of education, so I got past my inherent nervousness and, when asked why they should hire me, I got some serious swagger and bluntly said, “You very well may find someone with more teaching experience than I have, however, you will not find anyone who has as much passion, commitment, and belief in these kids as I do.” It was a small mic drop moment that apparently worked, because they hired me. The university I went to even ended up working with me so that I could become state certified under some unique terms.

I had the most amazing students and loved being their teacher. I excelled in the profession, and my kids’ success rate basically doubled from that of the year before. Despite the odds being against me, I achieved what the world would call success, and on top of that I finally had that stable financial security I deeply desired.

Over time, however, the pressure of the state’s obsession with standardized test scores became increasingly

draining. I found meaning in my job through the relationships with my students, not in trying to cram a bunch of information into their heads that could be passionlessly regurgitated in the form of mindlessly bubbling in seventy-something multiple choice answers. In the depths of my soul, I knew it was time for a change. Do you ever feel like that? Like there is more to this thing we call life?

It was time to get back in touch with a passion I'd set on the back burner during my years teaching.

I had always had a flame for social justice. One night, as a somewhat ignorant young college student, while trying to work out, I watched some random documentary on Iraq and that flame exploded into a massive ball of fire as if someone had thrown a bottle of kerosene onto it. My heart broke for Iraq and its people, and I needed to learn more. I wanted a better understanding. So I began taking as many classes as I possibly could on the Middle East and the lovely Arabic language (which, after four years of classes and the ability to read and write, I still can't speak). As I progressively learned more about the Middle East, I made some amazing friends and fell in love with the people and the culture. After a trip to Palestine toward the end of college, my heart's greatest desire became clear: I really wanted to be part of the change our world needs. I wanted to do anything in my power to extend love to the amazing people who were displaced from their homes in the Middle East. I wanted to be involved with refugee work. My greatest passion became and continues to be pursuing peace and embracing the way of genuine love with our neighbors from the Middle East who have become refugees, often because of circumstances involving our own nation. The people I have encountered through this passion are some of the most amazing, kind, strong people in this world, and it's inexcusable that much

of our society has turned their backs on or labeled them “the other.”

Though this became my greatest passion, I didn’t really know where to start or how I could support my daughter doing that kind of work, so this desire sat on the sideline as I finished college and started my teaching career.

A few years went by before I noticed a friend of a friend on Facebook who ran a nonprofit working with refugees. I reached out to him, curious about his work, and after we realized we had a ton in common, especially our shared love of the Middle East, one thing turned into another and we began dating. The thing was, Rich lived in Iowa and I lived in Texas, so after a year and a ton of airfare, we decided to get married and that I would move up to the great state of Iowa at the end of the school year. At that point, I was faced with a choice: I could find a new teaching job in the Midwest, even though I felt my passion and purpose already fading, or I could do something different. I could let go of a good career that offered me financial security and seek something more, working alongside my amazing husband. However, the choice wasn’t that cut and dry: nonprofit work doesn’t tend to pay a ton, and Rich’s income was marginal. If I decided to join Rich, the financial stability I had worked so hard for would be gone, by choice. It took some time to find the courage, but ultimately, I said, “F-it” and gave up that job that provided me financial security in order to work part-time subbing (glorified babysitting) so I could pursue something I deeply believed I was supposed to be doing—humanitarian work with refugees from the Middle East.

I took quite a bit of criticism over my decision—many times from Christian types—and I understand that in our

culture of achievement, this change in my life looked dumb. But honestly, I didn't care too much. No one has ever done anything truly meaningful without taking big risks. If you look at the teachings and life of Jesus, giving up financial security to follow his ways and love others is pretty on point. Peter, Andrew, James, John, and Matthew literally walked off their job sites to follow Jesus. You don't think that was a risk to their financial security? So, regardless of any risks, stress, and being thought of as an idiot, making the decision to pursue something I deeply believe in has brought immense joy to me and my family.

Since taking that step of faith, I have continued to discover a better understanding of who the real Jesus is. You don't have to look far (basically read any of the Gospels) to realize that the Middle Eastern Jewish man who lived two thousand years ago and went by the name of Jesus lived a radically minimalist life of bold, risky love. And to follow this guy on whom a major religion is based is to live a life boldly loving others first, regardless of how countercultural it might look in our White-Jesus society. This narrow road is hard and crazy, but the value and purpose to be found is indeed the pearl of great price. It's worth it completely.

\* \* \*

Though I grew up in the American Church, I never really fell into religion; I think I sensed the hypocrisy from a pretty young age. My husband, Rich, on the other hand, has a very different story. He grew up in the middle-of-nowhere Iowa, a super handsome, charismatic athlete (in the '90s when jocks were apparently a big deal) and pretty much partied through high school and college. He then spent most of his twenties chasing the benjamins and was

incredibly successful building that consumerist idea of the American life that we are told we are supposed to want.

In his late twenties, Rich's world fell apart overnight. He was married with two young kids and had all the material and career success in the world. The problem was he never really was able to deal with the anxiety of the world without booze, and he drank constantly. Eventually, his wife understandably was sick of it, and she left him. He should have seen it coming, but addiction can blind you from reality, so he was caught completely off guard. He was a mess after losing his family, and one night he had a unique, Paul-like encounter in his basement. He began to follow Jesus and quit drinking literally overnight (which is insane considering the amount he drank). He then left his high-paying job in medical sales in order to become a better father for his kids.

After Rich randomly started following Jesus, not really knowing where to start, a former coworker of his heard what was going on and told him to check out a certain church because "the pastor used to be a really good wrestler." Wrestling is really big in Iowa. So Rich stumbled into an evangelical fundamentalist movement and quickly fell into hardcore religion. He became a Neo-Calvinist, was really into the masculine Christianity movement, thrived in the use of apologetics, and began taking master's level seminary courses. He was basically a poster boy for White-Jesus American Christianity.

Luckily, it didn't last. There came a point when Rich realized that what he saw in the American White-Jesus Church and what he saw in the red letters didn't align, and one day all the theology he thought was "the way" came crashing down. Rich was attending a talk by Carl Medearis, an expert on Arab-American and Muslim-Christian

relations who has spent years in the Middle East and has written some great books. This was around the time of the Libyan uprising, and Rich was super interested. After the event, Rich went up to Carl and said, “So you are going to Libya?” Carl looked him dead in the eyes and said, “Yeah, why don’t you come with me?”

It was one of those life-changing moments when something as simple as an invitation makes you realize you can do more than you ever imagined. Rich was in. He and Carl exchanged information, and he planned on going to the Middle East for the first time.

In a United Nations refugee camp in the middle of the Tunisian desert along the Libyan border, he had a conversation with a stoic, statuesque man that would change the course of Rich’s life forever. It started with a general question that everyone was asked: Had the man come to the camp alone, or was his family with him? In a straightforward manner the man informed them his family was no longer with him. He further went to explain the brutality, suffering, and execution of his family that he had witnessed firsthand. Though his life may have been spared, his punishment was worse than death. As my husband looked into the eyes of this man, he was silenced, unable to say a word. There was hollow hopelessness in the man’s almost lifeless eyes that he had never encountered. What words could be said? Though Christianity had “trained” him for circumstances such as this, there was no adequate response for what he had just heard.

This conversation haunted Rich as he came to realize that the commitment to understanding Christian theology had become a blatant distraction to the true purpose of following Jesus: love. Simply loving others. All his training had not helped him become more loving to those like

this man; rather, it was an attempt at a modern day manifest destiny, basically conquering people who are *not like us* with the intention of making them *more like us*. Though his desire was always to love, his theology and deep religious roots subtly but completely contradicted the Great Command of Jesus. Realizing this disconnect, Rich detoxed and found his way into a life of truly trying to follow the red-letter Jesus.

I didn't meet my husband until after this transition; he is the kindest, most genuine, loving man I have ever encountered. Honestly, it's hard for me to imagine him as a raging conservative Christian. If we would have met earlier in life, someone definitely would have had a drink thrown in his face.

Through Rich's transition, he ended up starting a nonprofit called The Nations, which is dedicated to peace and humanitarian work, both domestically and abroad, with refugees from the Middle East and North Africa. His work has taken him all over the world in a quest to love, serve, and learn from our amazing neighbors who have been displaced from their nations for various tragic reasons. You can probably see now why we fell for each other. That, and he is the most amazing cook in existence.

Like Rich and me, there are many out there with completely different backgrounds who have somehow come to the understanding that the ways of the red-letter Jesus are dramatically different from those of the American Christian White-Jesus. With the mess that is our world, it is more than time for us to re-examine the ways of Jesus in contrast to what we see in the ideology of our self-proclaimed, so-called Christian nation.

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This book is an invitation to look again at the Gospels' red letters—without all the religious crap. Focus on the ways of Jesus and question what you have been told you are supposed to believe in light of what you see through the teachings of the radical refugee Messiah. You very well may not (let's be real, you will probably not) agree with everything that I say, and that is awesome. I don't know everything. In the grand scheme of the universe I probably know close to nothing. What I do know is our world is a mess, and White American Christianity is a mess. I could be wrong, and if someone could explain how these self-proclaimed American Christian views of White-Jesus align with the true Jesus, please enlighten me. But to be real, if you wondered why it took me twenty-five years to figure out Jesus when I was surrounded by Christianity, there is your explanation—American Christianity is not synonymous with the ways of the Jesus we see in the red letters.

Though my stance on many topics will be apparent, my purpose is not to convince you that I am right but to provoke thought, conversation, and hopefully a revolution in regard to the hurt we are seeing in our world because of the White-Jesus fabrication.

This is why I am writing this book. I want us to look at some of the issues that are being proclaimed by the ideology of White-Jesus American Christianity and examine how this ideology relates to the ways of the true Jesus. Salvation, self-protection, humility, judgment, consumerism, race, war, sexuality, abortion, immigration—all topics the general American Church has a vocal and clear way of approaching. But what do the red letters say? Where is Jesus and where is White-Jesus?

This book is divided into two sections: The first deals with what Jesus said was our greatest command and

how we can go about truly being the change we need in this world in better alignment with the red letters. The second deals with some of the above-mentioned important questions on various issues in our society that we need to consider rethinking from a red-letter perspective. Throughout the chapters of this book, there are questions to help you reflect and process, as well as a discussion guide at the back of the book. You can read this book solo, with a friend or group of friends and process together. Your thoughts, interpretations, and views matter!

It is largely because of the ideology of White-Jesus Christianity that this nation is more divided than ever. Instead of seeing love, we are drowning in hate. White-Jesus Christianity has created a climate that contradicts the red letters; it's incredibly exclusive and full of condemnation and hypocrisy. It's time to go against the grain and be the change you want to see.

You were made for more than a life of mediocrity. It's time to go back to the basics, drop the weird religious crap, and focus on the red letters. This is where we will see true, meaningful change in our world, a revolution based on bold, red-letter love. So let's explore Jesus, the real red-letter Jesus, not your white Jesus.